

September 19, 2021

Mark 9:30-37

“Who is the GOAT?”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For those of us who are older, when we think of a goat we think of a funny, hairy, farm animal. For those who are much younger, the word “GOAT” (in capital letters) stands for the “Greatest Of All Time.” To be the GOAT (the Greatest Of All Time) isn’t just a cute acronym. It’s a title that carries significant weight. It not only means that you are the best in your given sport, but it means that you are close to being inseparable from the sport you played. So when you argue that someone is the GOAT, it means that they have defined greatness in their given sport and set a standard that seems impossible to transgress. It’s a big deal.

Who is the Greatest Of All Time? I’m not talking about sports or any other category like it. With that question - Who is the Greatest of All Time? - I am now asking us to identify the greatest human being that has ever been or ever will be? You probably are already on to my answer before I give it. The answer is Jesus, the Son of God, our Savior.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, we have two sections that may not seem to immediately go together, but they really do when you meditate on it. But right before the issue is raised among the disciples about who is the greatest we are given the answer and even the reason why in Mark 9:30-32. In these two verses Mark records:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

In this section, we see that Jesus foretells his death and resurrection for the salvation of all humanity. At the time, the disciples did not understand what he was saying. What a blessing then it is for us to know and believe this! Christ died for us! Christ rose from the dead on the third day for us! He did these acts in order to cover our sins and reassure us that our sins are really covered in him, so that we might not perish but have eternal life. It can’t get any greater than that!

Following the above section we move into the next. Keep in mind that Jesus and his disciples have been traveling now for awhile. Mark then records for us the following (9:33-37):

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

So do you want to be the greatest? Jesus says, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” Jesus illustrates this with a child. Please keep in mind that in Jesus’ day children hardly counted for much and were often considered to be unimportant in the larger scheme of things. This still holds true. While we see potential in children we hardly see greatness in them. Overall, a child is a person who can’t do much of anything for an adult. A child is helpless. A child can’t earn lots of money to support the family. A child can’t advise you about complex matters in the home or in the world. A child needs you and wants things from you. Greatness is to receive such a child. Greatness is to lower yourself under a child and serve. Greatness is to give yourself to a child that simply needs you.

As you can begin to see, the central thought of our lesson is that discipleship is a matter of humility and service. Greatness is not about fame and prestige. Again, those words of Jesus pierce the ear, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” It is no wonder why so few people dare to travel down the road of greatness. However, for true disciples of Christ who have been set free by him, there wells up in their souls the desire to give to others what has been so freely given to them. And that brings us to an astonishing truth about the Christian life.

True greatness comes when Jesus - the Greatest Of All Time - embraces us as one who would embrace and serve a child. This embrace of Jesus is found in his death and resurrection for us. He sacrifices himself on the cross for us wretched sinners. In such a lowering of himself we are lifted up in him - exalted to the kingdom of heaven. And having been lifted up by Jesus so wonderfully, we desire to lower ourselves that others might be lifted up to the heaven that is ours. True greatness is that which imitates the greatness of Jesus. It is something done by faith. It is something that is done apart from selfish ambition. And since faith and good works are a gift of God, the greatness that is ours is in fact the greatness of God in and through us.

Look again at what Jesus does for us children in our text! He says, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” True greatness is seen in the unselfish sacrifice of Jesus for his poor children. And what does Jesus get from the whole thing? He takes our sin, death, and hell. That is what we give to him. That is our contribution to the one who is all in all. He gives us everything in the forgiveness of all our sins.

As we can all see, Jesus is the Greatest Of All Time! He did not choose the road of a superstar. He became poor so that we might become rich. Even though he is the King of kings and rules the universe, the apostle writes of him saying: “[he] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8).” Yes! There is no one greater than Jesus or ever will be! In the words of one Lutheran Pastor:

He came to be the Chief Servant so that the orders of the world could be overturned and men and women could find their strength in Him from whom they came and to whom they must return. In this singular act Christ made possible freedom from everything that enslaves God’s fallen world so that it can again know and serve the Father. That is not an act of

weakness, but of strength – by no means an act of seeking His own glory, but of giving up that He might take on Himself the weakness of our mortality and become a participant in our death. It was for this that He came into the world, and He did what was given Him [to do] with all the strength at His command.

Indeed! And because of him, by faith we take up the strength of his life, death, and resurrection and serve those around us simply because that is our identity in Baptism, where the name of the Triune God is upon us - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - the only God who saves us. Jesus! He came to serve not to be served. He wraps a towel around his waste and cleans the dirt. It is true greatness that is utter foolishness to the world, but to us it is the wisdom of God.

The pyramids of Egypt are famous because they contained the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptian Pharaohs. Westminster Abbey in London is renowned, because in it rests the bodies of English nobles and notables. Mohammad's tomb is noted for the stone coffin and the bones it contains. The Taj Mahal was built as a memorial to a wife of one of India's Shahs. Arlington cemetery in Washington, D.C. is revered for it is the honored resting place of many outstanding Americans. But the tomb of Jesus is famous not because of what is inside, but because it is empty! Because his crucifixion, death, and resurrection was the sacrifice of himself for us, that is what makes him the GOAT. That is what makes him the Greatest Of All Time!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott